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HUMAN RELATIONS NEWS from the NEWARK HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

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Special Issue

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Our January issue is dedicated to the memory of John F. Kennedy and to our nation's writers and poets. It is quite fitting that we do so, because the martyred President held our nation's creative artists in high regard and was, in return, esteemed by them, for truly, he was one of them.

In the following pages we have mixed the old with the new; poems, quotations, excerpts from novels, in an attempt to indicate that our nation's creative personalities were and are concerned with the subject of human rights. The older names we know you will recognize instantly, but we are using this issue to introduce a new name. Throughout the pages ahead, the poems of Alan Caruba will appear. He is a native of Newark, former Assistant Director of the Florida Regional Office of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, and a rising young literary figure who has broken many of the traditions of the Literary Establishment. We think his poetry will speak for itself . . . and, perhaps, echo hidden thoughts.

We wish to express our appreciation to Mr. Caruba for the selection you are about to read and the accompanying commentary.

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"If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could far better judge what to do and how to do it . . . agitation not only has not ceased, but has constantly augmented. In my opinion it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached and passed . . . a house divided against itself cannot stand."

Abraham Lincoln

The poet, William Blake, wrote a poem entitled, "The Little Black Boy" which started off with these lines:

My mother bore me in the southern wild
And I am black, but O my soul is white;
White as an angel is the English child
But I am black as if bereaved of light.

The keen eye will note the understated irony in describing the English child as "white as an angel" and the poet's sense of compassion which prompts the single, perfect word following the second evocation of "I am black" by saying the Negro child is "bereaved."

It was for this reason that New England philosopher, Henry David Thoreau, wrote, "Poetry *implies* the whole truth. Philosophy expresses a particle of it . . ." This philosopher, who yearned to be a poet, also expressed himself on the subject of freedom in terms that most eloquently describe the situation in which the American Negro has found himself for a hundred years since the Emancipation Proclamation:

"What is it to be born free and not to live free? What is the value of any political freedom, but as a means to moral freedom?"

An important function of the writer or poet is to observe and comment on his times and, in particular, to address himself to the abuses and inequities of his society.

In her book, *Strange Fruit*, authoress Lilian Smith depicts an aspect of segregation that few white people contemplate. It is the self-inflicted segregation taught to the Negro child in order that he might *survive* in the world of "Whites Only:"

Mamie found the broom, slowly swept the pieces into a paper and put them in her apron, following him to the shed. "Hit's easy to break things. Ain't easy to mend 'em up again. Dat what I want my boy to learn early. Want him to learn dat *no matter what*, white folks is always right! And you treats 'em *always respectful*."

"It means I'm white," Tracy whispered, "and you're black," eyes never leaving the shed where the two stood talking, deep shadows against the lamplight cabin. "It means," he went on and he felt a strange new swelling pride rising in him, "I'm always right, I reckon."

"How come?" asked Henry dully.

"Cause I'm white — you heard Mamie!"

"Do skin make the diffunce?"

"Reckon so," Tracy said, losing his new confidence a little, "Yes, reckon it do."

Black boy and white boy stood there in the darkness, watching the grown folks' trouble, and slowly Henry turned and went to the cabin, and slowly Tracy went to the big yellow house.

* * *

The other side of the coin of segregation is portrayed in this short exchange of conversation which appears in Sinclair Lewis's novel, *Kingsblood Royal*:

"But you take a Negro, Doctor. Would you feel that it was wise to have a Negro for dinner, if he was a qualified preacher?"

"Now, now, Neil don't try to pin me down! As I told you, I belong to the New School. I wouldn't in the least mind, say at a Convention, sitting down with Negro intellectuals. But to have one for dinner in my house—oh no, my friend! That would not be kind to *them*! They aren't used to our way of living and thinking."

THE BIGOT'S LITANY

He asked to be Equal
With a White Man like ME!
He spoke of his Rights
And the Land Of The Free!

I love burning crosses
And wearing white sheets,
And blowing up churches
Is just one of my feats.

You can shop in my store
And spend all your Money,
But don't stop to eat,
Just move along Honey . . .

DON'T DRINK from this fountain,
DON'T SWIM in that pool;
That there is for White Folks,
Not some Nigger fool.

DON'T PRAY in MY church,
DON'T COME to MY school.
Just stay in your Own,
That's MY Golden Rule.

Your God ain't MY God,
Cause MY God is WHITE!
I go EVERY Sunday
And pray to do Right.

MY RIGHTS and your rights
Just ain't quite the same.
Why won't you accept this
And just play the game?

My RULES are so easy,
Here's just a FEW;
STAY OUT of the rest-rooms,
And the moviehouse too.

STAY OUT of the terminal
Where the buses arrive,
STAY OUT of the parks
And you'll stay alive.

Sure you can vote,
Just step up and Try.
But that *last* Nigger did it,
Just *happen* to die.

You say that's not livin'?
You'de rather be dead?
I'll arrange for a bomb
To blow off your fool head.

You listen good, you hear????
You listen to ME . . .
I've taken enough talk
About E-QUAL-LIT-Y!

It makes me feel good.
It makes me feel bright,
To know that I'm Special
Just cause I am White.

The Police Chief's my friend,
And all the cops too,
IMAGINE SEEKING JUSTICE . . .
A Black Man like YOU!

I made the Laws and I
Will enforce them.
I think they're sitting
And fully endorse them.

Well, that is my story.
You say there's a sequel?
A Black Man stood up
And said HE'S MY EQUAL????

I'm weary, I'm tired and
There's always one more,
But I'll Fight to the last,
Cause this is MY war.

My fight still goes on,
But I'm losing I fear,
My friends all desert me,
And turn a deaf ear.

THEY SAY I'M IMMORAL,
That skin don't decide
The Worth of a Man
Whose heart beats inside.

The poem entitled "The Bigot's Litany" rips away the facade of the racial bigot to reveal his innermost thoughts. Having spent many years in Florida and Georgia, poet Caruba is no stranger to this way of thinking. "The Bigot's Litany" paints a picture of the prevailing condition.

"Some of my best friends are . . ."

Hypocritical Anonymous

The noted Negro comedian, Dick Gregory, indicates just how foolish the prejudiced "way of thinking" is with the following comment on the "separate but equal" schools.

"I went to one of those separate but equal schools down South. I don't know how old the text books were, but they sure kept me out of the Navy. If people wanted to sail off the edge of the earth—I sure wasn't gonna be one of them! And those Southern history books! Do you realize I was twenty-two before I learned that Lincoln freed the slave? I always figured Jefferson Davis had us out on probation."

"From the Back of the Bus."

The fact that Dick Gregory can poke fun at what is fundamentally a massive, national problem lends creditation to the belief that things are changing for the better. The poet, Alan Caruba, uses as his personal symbol, a tennis game in progress.

MIXED DOUBLES . . .

A net.
Two couples playing.
A ball ponging
 Back and forth —
On one side
 Negroes,
On one side
 Whites;
The net does not separate them
And can be leaped in a single
 Bound.

Copyright, Alan Caruba, 1964

Our next quotation comes straight out of life from the lips of a robed Klansman addressing a crowd outside St. Augustine, Florida. It is last September and the fiery cross has burned itself out, but not the speaker who shouted:

"Some of the Niggers say, 'We want to go to your churches.' There ain't but one manly, Christian thing to do when they try, and that is to meet 'em at the churchhouse door with a baseball bat and to beat their brains out."

It would be well at this point to reconsider the words of John F. Kennedy when he spoke October 27th of last year at Amherst College to honor another poet, Robert Frost, and, through him, all poets:

"When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses."

"I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty . . ."

Less than a month later, November 22nd, John F. Kennedy was felled by an assassin's bullet. Editor and columnist, Ralph McGill, in writing of the violence that has become a part of our daily lives and to which, in a very real manner, our silence sanctifies, wrote this moving commentary:

"The darkness of the grave asks, what about the handful of governors, of congressmen, legislators, editors, and persons in positions of public life and community leadership who encourage defiance of the courts and laws of their country? This question is one that more and more demands an answer for a people who have looked at the darkness of the grave at Arlington."

* * *

The poet is often a chronicler of his times and many poems written about a particular event are a part of our literary heritage today. One example is Walt Whitman's "Oh Captain, My Captain." It is in this poetic tradition that Alan Caruba wrote in the days immediately after the assassination. He cautions that the title, "The Season of Our Despair," expresses the feelings of those first hours and is a warning to all who do not learn their lesson.

THE SEASON OF OUR DESPAIR . . .

Thus began the season of our despair.
Weeping, weeping
In the streets, the homes, the offices where
Desperate secretaries burst through doors
To shout, "He's been shot!"

Who? Who? "The President. He's been
Shot." Their voices said
My son, my husband, my brother's dead
and I am lost . . . lost . . .

Stunned drivers at the wheel found they
No longer had a direction
In which to go . . . and so they stopped and
Wondered who or what could do a thing
Like that? A madman!

Explain to a child that the President
Of the United States was just shot dead.
No classroom teacher could,
So they sent the children home instead.

What was now to be our nation's fate?
Trembling in our souls we knew
The awful truth that violence holds no
Allegiance to anything but hate.

In the halls of Congress they wandered,
Dazed as children in a storm.
The chill of death had filled the domes
And corridors of the bi-cameral
Chambers and run like so much quick-
Silver, striking awesome fear.
"This cannot happen here. Not here!"

Only the assassin's heart could ever frame
The words to tell what burned within
His fevered brain and we were robbed of
Even that small knowledge by an act,
As ignorant of our sense of justice as the
One that stole Jack from us all.

Something Oswald was had caught us unaware.
No one asked if we had failed him.
As surely as we fail each time we say
That "all men are equal" and then go home
To live our segregated way.
The ghost of John Wilkes Booth rose that
Night and danced upon the grave of Lincoln.

Six white horses bore him forth and the flag
He loved was draped upon his bier.
We watched the mournful pageantry, stunned,
We watched the leaders of the world, commoners
In grief, as they then chose to walk
Behind the muffled drums, behind the catafalque.

Now lay him gently on the sloping hill.
And say a prayer for all who cared
Enough to give their lives
That you and I might sleep in peace tonight,
Tomorrow, next week, next year,
In this our season
Of despair.